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ARTICLE

'I believe in building people up': A call for attention to asset-based community development in geographical framings of poverty in the global North

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Abstract

This paper calls for human geographers examining poverty in the global North to attend more to asset-based community development (ABCD) poverty interventions in order to complement geographers' current foci on how people experience and respond to poverty. ABCD is a community movement that originated in the USA that emphasises principles of focusing on gifts and assets rather than deficits, and on relationships at the neighbourhood level. In doing so, ABCD starts from what is 'strong' rather than 'wrong' in order to work towards community transformation. This paper's focus on ABCD emerges from an ethnography with a community following ABCD on an estate in Birmingham, UK. The housing estate in which the ethnography was conducted is an area of relatively high UK deprivation. However, the ethnography drew out how, through ABCD intertwined with a Christian ethos, local volunteers and community workers endeavoured to reframe the questions being asked of and by the community in order to focus on people's gifts, foster neighbour-to-neighbour support, and shun stigma. In conclusion, the paper argues that giving more attention to ABCD poverty interventions will complement human geographers' existing attention to poverty in the global North by broadening our foci, including to question whether ABCD interventions could be used more widely to combat both the existence and experience of poverty. However, this comes with a warning: in giving more attention to assets, we must be careful to avoid romanticising poverty, and so this must be alongside existing geographical attention to austerity and welfare provision.

KEYWORDS

asset-based community development, COVID-19 pandemic, ethnography, gifts, poverty

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